

Statement for the Record

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FIXING FEMA

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Exhaustive studies of the government's response to Hurricane Katrina consistently tell a sad tale. The response ranks as one of the worst failures of government administration in the nation's history. The tragedy is compounded by two things. First, following the September 11 terrorist attacks, the nation had invested four years—and leadership by the nation's top officials—to ensure that the nation would be ready the next time. It was not. Second, the problems occurred despite the enormous efforts of everyone involved, from top federal officials to local officials on the front lines, to do their very best. Despite that, citizens needlessly suffered, and some unquestionably died because their government did not serve them.

When that happens, despite best efforts, the inescapable diagnosis is that the system failed. The certain prescription is that it needs a radical overhaul. What follows is a plan of action that would restore FEMA's effectiveness.

Three Principles

Three principles ought to guide the effort to fix FEMA.

First Principle: Reform the Culture, Don't Obsess on the Structure

The central question is whether the lead government agency, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, ought to be moved out of the Department of Homeland Security to an independent super-agency charged with emergency preparedness and response. If we had the decision to make over again, we might well not have put FEMA into DHS to begin with. There is substantial evidence that the move disrupted FEMA's organization and led to the departure of a large number of its most skilled employees.

However, the last thing FEMA needs now is yet another fundamental disruption in its organization and operations. Over the decades, it has bounced like a ping pong ball around the federal bureaucracy. Deciding now to make FEMA independent of DHS would solve some problems. It would just as surely create new ones. And it certainly would stir up more turmoil just as the agency is trying to regain its feet.

More important, to focus on FEMA's structure is to miss the fundamental lesson that lies between the lines of the House Select Committee Report, the White House's report, and the host of independent studies that have already surfaced on the management of the disaster. *FEMA's fundamental failure was one of coordination.*

There is no reason to believe that a fundamental restructuring of FEMA would solve its coordination problems. A different structure would bring new advantages—and new disadvantages. It would also perpetuate the myth that the complex and wildly varying nature of problems FEMA faces can be solved through structural changes. *What FEMA most needs is strong leadership devoted to collaboration, and political support from the highest levels of government—in the White House and in Congress—for this mission.*

Consider the boundaries separating FEMA's regions and the path of Hurricane Katrina (see Figure 1). Katrina showed an uncanny instinct for finding the cracks between the FEMA's regional boundaries. If FEMA now restructured its boundaries to prevent a recurrence of the confusion that surrounded Katrina, the next storm might well outwit the structural designers yet again. Biological hazards might well pose very different problems than natural disasters, and terrorist attacks could pose yet more confounding problems. Structure unquestionably matters. Some structures are better than others. But responding to every problem with a new structure is certain only to destabilize the organization's operations and undermine its ability to respond to new crises. And it would divert attention from the more important imperative of building a new coordinating strategy.

There is nothing inherent in FEMA's current structure that prevents coordination from occurring. What FEMA most needs now is not another shuffle in the deck of the government's organization charts. It need strong and effective leadership to build new systems of coordination. Hence,

- *FEMA's fundamental problem is not structural. It needs an instinct and culture, running from top to bottom, that focuses on coordination as job one.*

Second Principle: Build an All-Hazard System

At the core of FEMA's struggle after Katrina was the narrowing and distortion of its mission: a focus on terrorism, to the exclusion of other hazards; and an emphasis on response, to the exclusion of remediation and other strategies of reducing risks in advance of events. The narrow focus produced a tunnel vision that dramatically reduced FEMA's capacity to respond to natural disasters like Katrina.

This is not to suggest that FEMA should turn away from terrorism or reduce its capacity for dealing with events caused by terrorists. Rather, it is to recognize that, when major events occur, the effectiveness of the response does not depend significantly on what caused them. Many of the canine search and rescue teams that worked in the horrible conditions of Ground Zero in New York joined the search in New Orleans. For the dogs searching for victims, it did not matter whether terrorists or hurricanes had toppled the buildings. For victims trapped on rooftops in New Orleans, it did not matter whether terrorists or flooding had chased them there. When disasters occur, people need help.

It makes far more sense to create the capacity to respond, quickly and effectively, to disasters, whatever their cause. Experts call this an "all-hazard" approach. Enhancing the capacity to respond to hurricane victims surely does not diminish the capacity to respond to terrorist attacks. Indeed, it would only strengthen it. On the other hand, despite FEMA's focus on terrorism, its response to Katrina does not inspire confidence that its response to a terrorist attack would have been any better. What FEMA needs to respond well to *any* disaster is what it needs to respond well to *all* disasters. This was a central part of the FEMA approach before its move to DHS. That capacity was seriously weakened by steps taken after its move.

- ***FEMA should refocus its mission and operational strategies on an all-hazard approach.***

Third Principle: Build an Effective Intergovernmental-Interorganizational Culture

The enormous complications of merging 22 different federal agencies, including FEMA, into DHS have understandably preoccupied top leaders. They have devoted an enormous amount of energy simply to trying to synchronize the operations of its disparate agencies. That process, however, has created an inward-looking culture with an extremely narrow tunnel vision, devoted to controlling activities dealing with homeland security. Its mission demands a flexible, outward-facing culture devoted to building partnerships with the vast range of organizations—public, private, and nonprofit; federal, state, and local—whose operations, put together, define how well the nation's response works.

To twist Tip O'Neill's famous aphorism, all homeland security events are local. On the morning of September 11, the government's response began with firefighters from the New York City Fire Department rolling to what appeared to be the crash of a single plane into the World Trade Center. The first clues that levees had broken in New Orleans came

from Louisiana National Guard troops who, while reporting in to headquarters in Baton Rouge, noticed that water was quickly rising outside their front door. A sharp-eyed physician helped stem a monkeypox outbreak in Wisconsin in 2003. And the difference between some postal workers in the Washington area who lived—and some who died—were doctors who suspected the workers had been exposed to a dangerous substance and prescribed Cipro.

The nation's response to the hazards it faces—whether from humans seeking to inflict damage, storms that go where they go, or microbes that take advantage of weaknesses in our immune systems—depends first on the response of local officials.

The central question is whether the lead government agency, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, ought to be moved from the Department of Homeland Security to an independent super-agency charged with emergency preparedness and response. If we had the decision to make over again, we might well not have put FEMA into DHS to begin with. There is substantial evidence that the move disrupted FEMA's organization and led to the departure of a large number of its most skilled employees.

FEMA once had a strong intergovernmental nervous system. This principle became lost in its move to DHS, as FEMA began taking a top-down, command-oriented approach to disaster response. When Katrina hit, the top-down approach foundered, and FEMA found it had not developed the partnerships with state and local officials that it needed to manage an effective response.

- ***An effective response system must be engineered from the top down so that it works from the bottom up.***

Moreover, no organization can possibly build enough capacity to deal with a serious disaster. An effective FEMA response requires coordination with a wide range of organizations: sometimes with the military, sometimes with health agencies, sometimes with other government organizations; always with private organizations, nonprofit organizations, and state and local governments. FEMA's move to DHS reduced its instinct for such partnerships, and that weakness undermined its ability to respond to Katrina.

- ***An effective response system must be engineered with collaboration as its driving culture.***

Building Coordination

FEMA's core problem is its inability to secure effective coordination among all of those who help is needed to build an effective response. An organization with a fixed hierarchy and a fixed pattern of response will always be overwhelmed by events that do not match its structure. Since the array of homeland security events are unpredictable by their very nature, that approach dooms an organization with such a strategy to failure. That is precisely what happened in Katrina.

The steps to building an effective system of coordination should not be seen as a problem of structure, which requires a structural solution. Rather, it needs to be seen as an issue of partnership, which requires leadership.

FEMA needs to act as the conductor of a well-tuned orchestra, not as the commander of a hierarchy. In Katrina, there was an unseemly fight for the baton.

Such leadership, in turn, requires:

- Establishing FEMA as a reservoir of expertise, for both remediation and response.
- Creating within FEMA the locus of strong command. That command should focus bringing together the needed capacity wherever it can be found—not on insisting on giving orders through a hierarchy.
- Fashioning effective partnerships among the vast array of federal agencies whose expertise and capacity might be needed in a crisis. Not all agencies will be needed in every crisis, and which agencies will be needed when is impossible to predict.
- Building an effective intergovernmental link between FEMA and state/local governments.

This requires coordination that is both vertical (from local and state governments to the federal government) and horizontal (across the range of federal agencies with the ability to contribute to government's response). Such a system must, by necessity be flexible and lithe. It must be based on a networked, not a hierarchical approach to governance. It requires strong leadership to secure coordination. A “center-edge” approach (see Figure 2) provides a model.

- *FEMA at the center.* At the center should be FEMA. Its job would be to set policy goals; steer the system to achieve these goals; and measure results. It would provide money to partners in the network, including state and local governments, to reduce risks in advance and to enhance their ability to respond when needed. It would collect information about what works best.

In short, FEMA needs to be the conductor of a well-tuned orchestra, equipped to play the right notes depending on the score—depending on the events it must confront. That requires strong and effective leadership—leadership tirelessly devoted to building effective partnerships.

- *Federal agencies supporting the middle.* In the middle should be other federal agencies. Many agencies have the capacity to contribute to the federal government's response. The Department of Transportation can supply logistical help. Housing and Urban Development can assist with housing. Defense can provide emergency relief supplies, such as food and water, as well as helicopters and heavy equipment. Its forces, including the National Guard and federal troops,

can provide needed manpower. In disease-based and bioterror events, the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, among many other agencies, could play an important role.

In short, many federal agencies are potential contributors to a homeland security effort. Which agencies need to get involved depend on the nature of the event. Since events are hard to predict in advance, FEMA needs to be flexible, ready to bring in the assistance it needs, depending on the problem. It needs to be able to do so quickly, reliably, efficiently and responsively.

In each federal agency with an important—or potential—homeland security role, FEMA ought to identify a senior liaison official. This liaison ought to be prepared to deliver that agency's capacity when needed. These relationships ought to be tested and practiced, in advance, through a wide range of all-hazard exercises. The federal government needs to be prepared to respond with what is needed, when it is needed. The problem ought to define the strategy.

- *State and local governments at the edge.* Subnational governments work at the front lines. The first response system will only be as good as their response. FEMA has a central responsibility in ensuring that they are prepared to respond effectively. FEMA also has a central responsibility for bridging the gap between levels of government and between governments at the same level. For example, major communication problems have plagued every major homeland security response in recent years. FEMA has an obligation to help resolve those problems.

To ensure the system's ability at the edge to meet the widest possible array of homeland security problems, FEMA should enhance the role of its regional offices to secure a coordinated response. To do so, FEMA's regional offices should embed senior FEMA staffers in each of the 50 state homeland security offices, and it should work with them to build a coordinated all-hazard strategy.

Finally, FEMA should once again make remediation a major part of its mission, and to make grants to state and local governments a major part of its remediation strategy. In the past, critics have charged that homeland security grants were little more than patronage. In an era of high risk and tight budgets, that is unacceptable. Congress can avoid that problem by focusing the grant system on the areas and issues of highest risk, and by making the grants conditional on achieving high performance.

This is an imposing agenda. But it is not one that FEMA needs to build from scratch. The U.S. Coast Guard has already demonstrated that such an approach can work effectively. Indeed, the evidence from the Gulf Coast following Katrina's devastating strike is that such leadership is not only possible but that, when deployed, it can work remarkably

well. With the Coast Guard within DHS, along with FEMA, the two agencies have great potential for developing a synergistic partnership that could dramatically improve the nation's ability to respond to events of all types.

We know how to do this. We have evidence that it works. We have struggled with the painful consequences of failing to learn the repeated lessons of past events. The path is clear: FEMA needs to refocus its efforts on a partnership-based, performance-driven mission that builds an all-hazard approach.

Figure 1
FEMA's Regional Office Boundaries
and the Path of Hurricane Katrina

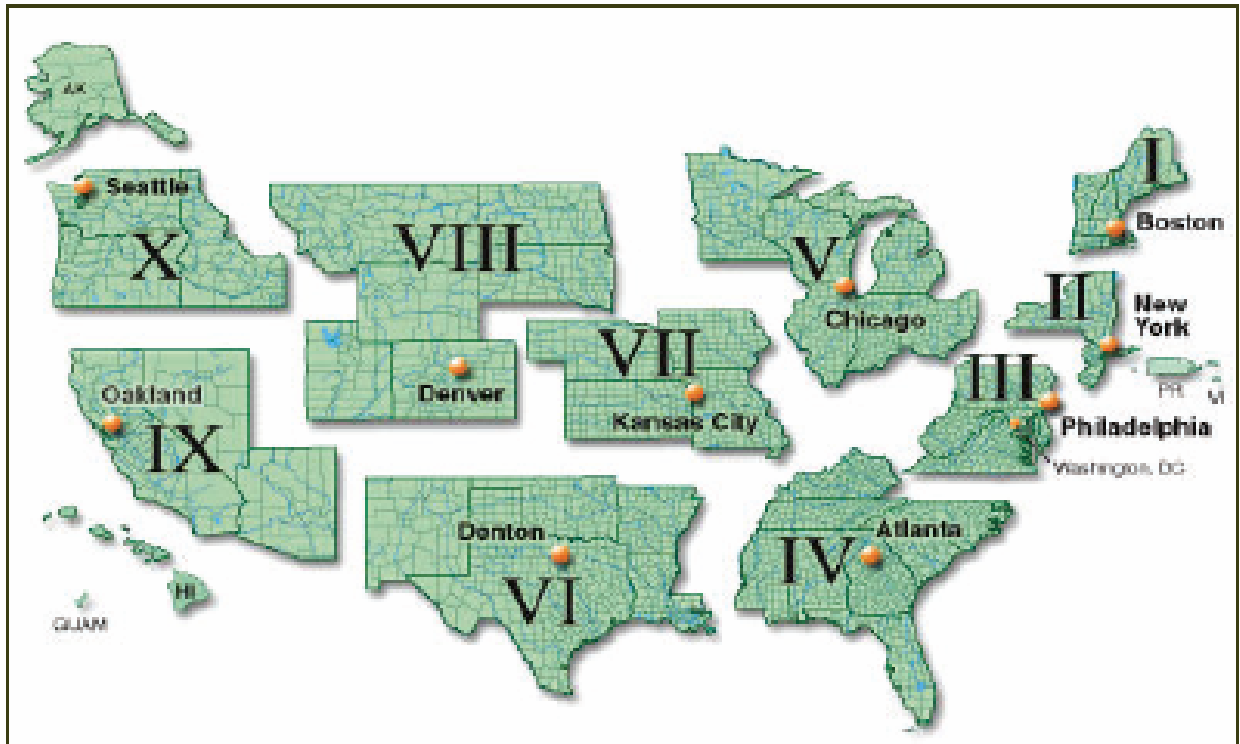
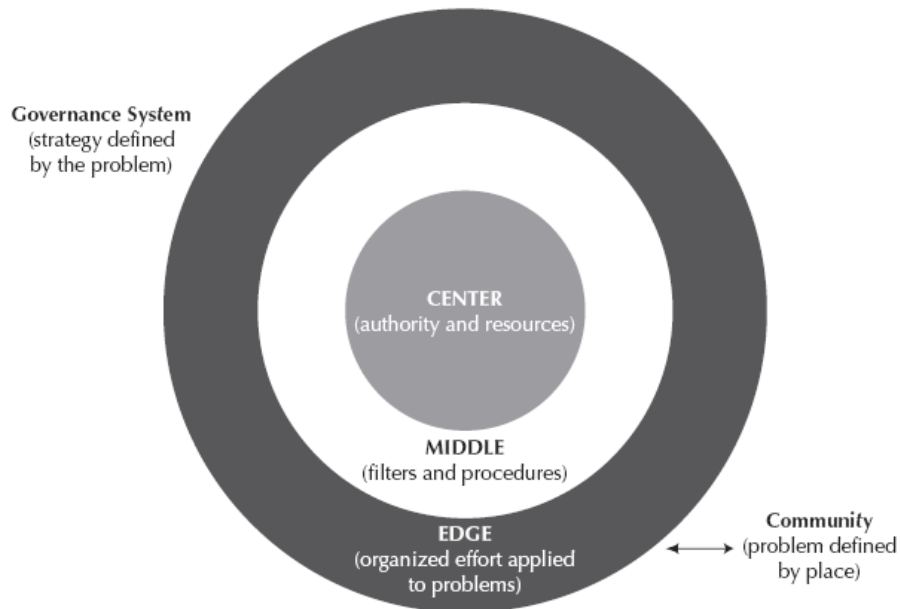


Figure 2 The Center-Edge Approach

Figure 2: Managing Networks Through the Center-Edge Approach



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Source: Donald F. Kettl, *The Next Government of the United States: Challenges for Performance in the 21st Century* (Washington: IBM Center for the Business of Government, 2005). See http://www.businessofgovernment.org/main/publications/grant_reports/details/index.asp?GID=235